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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews literature focusing on the effects of parent involvement in early childhood education. Background material for teacher workshops is included. (RH)

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Practical Methods of Parent Involvement

Rebecca S. Heinz

The past decade has seen the relationship between home and school become jaded and filled with mistrust. Parents often view the teacher as unconcerned about their children and primarily interested in perceived benefits of a teaching career: shorter hours, holidays, vacations and salary. (Conversely, numerous teachers view parents as the enemy. Often, negative experiences of parents and teachers lead to unfair generalizations about most teachers or most parents. A lack of trust often causes home-school communication to break down. It is the goal of this presentor to help you in renewing the sense of trust between home and school and create a partnership based on clear communication and reciprocity.

Successful home-school interaction is a difficult task but the rewards are well worth the effort. Research has demonstrated that three improvements occur when parents and schools cooperate: (1) the self-concepts of both parents and children increase; (2) childrens' motivation accelerates; and as a result, (3) children's achievement advances.

In early childhood education, the involvement of parents in the educational programs of their children has always been a conceptual cornerstone. Yet, even in early childhood an attitude has occassionally slipped in which suggest that involvement is a"bonus" which will make things go better if it can be achieved but which is not totally necessary for the operation of quality programs.

The term "Parent involvement" came from the field of early childhood development, having been introduced during the early Head Start days as a replacement for the term "Parent education". The Head Start programs wanted

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involvement of parents in all aspects of program operation, not merely enrollment in classes designed to help them learn more about principles of child development.

Almost no attention has been given to the preparation of future teachers for work in parent involvement activities. How many teacher training programs in our Colleges and Universities offer a course in how to work with parents? How many states require a course in techniques of working with parents as part of a teacHer training sequence? An accepted idea throughout all levels of the educational system is that skill and training are required of people who are to counsel students. If students do not get this awareness during their college days and do not receive the training necessary to help them exemplify the philosophy of parent involvement in their work, then how can we expect them to perform as competently in this area as in other aspects of teaching? It is my belief that we are on the threshold of modifying all our existing teacher training and staff development programs to give the task of working with parents its rightful place in the forefront of our educational endeavors.

The research on parent involvement has been extensive since the initiation of Head Start. The studies which follow which demonstrate the positive effects of parent involvement regarding childrens' achievement, self-esteem, motivation and language skills. The investigations show beneficial results for children, parents and in some cases for younger siblings.

Most important among the affirmative outcomes of parent involvement have been those found among Head Start progrmas. A survey of Head Start parents discovered a positive relationship between extensive parent participation and

children's scores reflecting better task orientation, academic achievement, verbal intelligence and self-concept. Significantly, the amount of parent involvement was apparently far more important than the model of participation. Parents who participated to a large extent saw themselves as more successful and skillful. Further, following their Head Start experience, parent involvement in community activities increased to higher levels than prior to Head Start (MIDCO, 1972).

Where parent involvement is highly active, parents tend to show an increase in self-esteem. Moreover, mothers have shown growth and development as adults. For example, the Nurseries in Cross-Cultural Education program for children and parents in San Francisco created various experiences for parents and children of their multi-cultural preschool, to enable parents to: (1) become more invovled in their children's learning: and, (2) become more aware of their own growth and development as adults. Personal growth changes, encouraged through parental observations and writing about their own and their children's experiences and feelings, were demonstrated when parents showed more understanding of developmental problems and confidence in their own resources. This data was reflected in home visit ratings and parents' own written descriptions (Lane, Elzey and Lewis, 1971).

A related effect was reported by Dr. Ira Gordon (1968), a leader of infant education at the University of Florida. Dr. Gordon found encouraging side benefits from his Parent Educator program, which sent trained "parent educators" (from the community) into homes to facilitate the mother-child-teaching-learning situation. When the mothers perceived the improvement in their children's development, their self-esteem as women increased. Following completion of the program, many of the mothers moved to better housing, found better jobs, and returned to school.

A high amount of parent involvement appears in several studies to have positively modified child motivation, achievement, and in return, increases in parent self-concept. Aside from those studies already mentioned, Willmon (1969) has provided evidence that parent involvement in preschool is crucial to the formation of achievement motivation in children. In her study, highly active parent participation "affected, to a great extent, achievement as indicated by the Metropolitan Reading Readiness Test." Willmon concluded by stating, "Parental involvement as an educational program for young children appears to be a factor in future academic motivation (page 410)."

The extent of involvement also appeared to be a factor in a study by Bittner, Rockwell and Matthews (1967-68). They found that children of highly involved parents retain gains better than children of low level participation parents. Parents who participated in school reportedly spent more time reading to their children and engaging in school-type activities than did non-involved parents. Such activities increased children's achievement on standardized tests. This has been found to be true in interviews with mothers of children who were read to more often, had more mealtime conversation with parents, and received less harsh physical punishment. These children achieved higher language scores on the California Test of Mental Maturity.

In another study concerned with language training for Head Start children, mothers involved in weekly parent education meetings increased their verbal skills as well as the quality of interactions with their children. The children developed a more positive perception of their mothers' opinions of them and scored higher on verbal intelligence subtests of the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (Kuipers, Boger and Beery, 1970). Finally, a study of Hayden, Murdoch and Quick (1969), showed that the presence of "Parent aides" in kindergarten and

first grade classrooms improves the attention span of children.

For years, special educators have regarded parents as potential sources of children's probelms. Presently,however,many of them are finding parent involvement to be an essential factor in the success of their educational programs (McDonald, 1971). Handicapping contitions, previously thought to be therapeutically too complex for parents to learn, have recently been shown to profit from a variety of home-school interactions (Kelly, 1974).

In speech pathology, mothers trained in basic speech correction methods, were able to improve their children's articulation significantly (England,1972). Studies involving extensive home-school interactions with parents of mentally retarded children, have cited several successful approaches. Because public school involvement with parents of physically handicapped children has been limited mostly to counseling, Connor (1970) has recommended that the teacher has "the responsibility for helping parents assume active roles in programming for their children and must constantly keep in mind the need to interpret realistic goals to parents (page 10)."

Direct parent involvement in b...ior modification has proven successful. Several authors have suggested that extensive parent involvement should be considered an essential parent involvemene should be considered an essential treatment procedure for emotionally disturbed children in both public schools and clinical settings (Woody, 1968). Finally, several investigations have indicated that parents can be successfully involved in facilitating the remedial instruction of their learning disabled chldren. Studies looking into parent group counseling on practical aspects of child management found it significantly improved reading achievement for disabled readers.

Other factors are currently encouraging parents to take a greater interest in the education of their children. The isolation of the schools is showing signs of waning, as evidenced by the Buckley Amendment which allows parents to "inspect and review" all records the school maintains on their children. The amendment, named after its author, Senator James Buckley (R-N.Y.) is formally titled the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and became a federal law in November, 1974.

As a result of this slowly declining isolation, the schools have lost support by telling parents to leave teaching to teachers. The traditional attitude of "Hands-off, we are the experts" is quickly fading, as is the old dichotomy separating education and child rearing. Many books are now written for both parents and teachers alike.

To be sure, everyone associated with education is becoming more sensitive to the role of parents in decision making. This is demonstrated by Article II of New Jersey's "Thorough and Efficient" Bill which states that there must be: "Encouragement of public involvement in the establishment of educational goals" (NJEA Review, November, 1975, page 20).

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the effectiveness of home-school programs comes from the parents themselves. Following are direct quotes from involved parents of both pre-school and elementary aged youngsters:

> I was not happy with my son's teacher. He went to school ready to learn, but he was stifled by her strict adherence to the school policy of one step at a time, regardless of

his individual needs. I had no idea I could have done something about this. A parent involvement group could make other parents aware that problems like this are not unsolvable.

We are very much satisfied with our school's parent involvement program. The coffee hours and dinners offer an additional and informal opportunity to exchange ideas. Also, parents are encouraged to share their hobbies and abilities with the classes. The teachers feel the parents have something worthwhile to contribute and we appreciate it very much.

I feel that home-school interaction is at a good level right now. The newsletter is an excellent way of communicating school news to parents. It's especially helpful to parents whose children are bused, as we are not at the school too often.

We are very well satisfied with the parent involvement activities at the school. We are kept informed on a consistent basis as to the programs. The teachers have time for parents and hwo us respect - and that's important!

These comments speak for themselves. Schools presently have the opportunity to build positive parent attitudes toward education on a large scale by working more closely with the home. Educators can accept the challenge to serve society by encouraging stable families and competent children. Successful parent involvement programs benefit many and have the potential for raising the quality of life for everyone.

Activity #1

Divide into two groups. Debate the pros and cons of parent involvement.

Activity #2

Discuss the advantages of educating infants and toddlers in child care centers vs. training parents to educate children at home.

Components of Programs

Basically, there are five components in a parent involvement program. Each of these components can be implemented simultaneously. The five components are 1) home-school communication; 2) classroom tasks, 3) parent awareness groups; 4) policy making; and 5) home-based curr. curriculum. If you choose to implement each component separately begin with home-school communication. Schools which used a variety of communication techniques report that trust levels between parents and teachers increase rapidly. When trust grows, the other components fall into place naturally. Let us take each component separately.

Home-School Communication Techniques

A parent wants the teacher to communicate specific knowledge about the childs school progress. He or she wants to know about: 1) the child's school activities; 2) how the child responds to other children in the classroom; 3)how other children respond to him; 4) how he gets along on the playground; 5) likes and dislikes about school; and 6) whether or not the teacher is truly concerned about him.

In order to communicate knowledge of these areas to parents, the following guidelines may be helpful; 1) collect samples of the childs' work (some work may go home-but keep others in a folder, ready for use in a parent conference); 2) keep index cards, slips of paper of clip boards and pencils all around the room and outside on the playground. When a child demonstrates a significant behavior (e.g. making a new friend, completing a difficult task, hitting someone, crying,etc.) jot down the name, date and specific behavior. Put the information in the childs' folder for use when speaking with parents; 3) use a parent volunteer to record childrens' activities (walking, skipping, climbing, etc.), used during play periods, are helpful in determining which activities a child enjoyed the most and where his strengths or difficulties may be, 4) realize that parents need reassurance. They don't want problems covered up or hidden, nor do they want them blown out of proportion; 4) communicate childrens' inappropriate behaviors to parents without the use of adjectives and 6) become familiar with community resources. Specific techniques follow:

- Telephone calls
- Home visits
- Language Experience Booklets
- Tape Recordings
- Requests for information
- Newsletters
- Scheduled Conferences
- Notices
- Glad Notes
- Star of the day
- Student talk at Open Hours
- Information Bulletin Boards
- Start to School Booklet

Classroom Tasks

The addition of parents into the classroom will initially mena more work for the teacher. Over the course of the school year, the added effort and work will create a more productive classroom. The teacher will be better able to focus her talents where they are most necessary. Children requiring individual attention wll receive it. Parents trained as aides can lessen the fatiguing pressures a teacher feels in attempting to meet the needs of all her children.

Parents must be given proper orientation prior to assuming classroom responsibilities. When parents know what is expected of them, the outcomes can be highly satisfying. It is vital that teachers and administrators take the time and plan each aspect so that the children and staff will reap the benefits which parents can provide. Teachers need to take the time to explain the following classroom functions: 1) Communication of goals, 2) Involvement in planning, and 3) Evaluation. It is important for the teacher to be aware of a parents special interests and strengths and to take advantage of them in the regular work of the classroom.

Involving parents within the classroom requires interpersonal and human relations skills on the part of the teacher. Such expertise includes listening to feelings in an active and accepting way, hearing the hidden message in a parents' voice, and being able to clarify strong feelings and reflect them back to the speaker. Also, the teacher must be skilled in the art of confrontation without explosion.

Teachers and parents may find themselves confronting each other over discipline methods and other areas such as values. Such problem areas may be softened somewhat if teachers would help explain "perception diffrerences".

Another area of friction between parent and teacher is that of professional ethnics: (1) the need for confidentiality regarding sensitive and private information about children or staff members; (2) avoiding the evaluation of chldren until criteria for evaluation is determined; (3) awareness of laws and policies regarding distribution of political materials in the school. The teacher must use and model her human relations skills in order to communicate honestly without causing hostility and alienation.

Generally, classroom tasks for parents fall into six areas: 1) maintenance, 2) checking, 3) supervision, 4) drill teaching, 5) creative teaching, 6) evaluation. A description of each task is included in your handouts.

Parent Awareness Groups

Through parent involvement, the vehicle for providing parents with skills and knowledge is available. Many preschool centers and public schools have monthly meetings of parents with the purpose of building awareness, sharing common child rearing problems, and learning new techniques to cope with them. Often, guest speakers, films, filmstrips and simulation activities are part of parent awareness groups.

Policy Making

Involving parents in policy making functions is perhaps the most penetrating type of involvement for it requires a share of the decision making power which significantly effects the center/ school for better or for worse.

The Center Committee is composed of parents whose children attend the center. No staff member serves this committee. Its purpose is to advise and help the teaching staff. Through the committee, parents express their ideas and concerns to a teacher or parent involvement coordinator about how well the program is meeting the needs of the children.

Home Based Curriculum

This final component will be discussed in a few minutes after reviewing the filmstrip.

Activity #3
In groups, outline what should be included in a newsletter to parents (format, content).

Activity #4
Brainstorm a list of free resources for parents of a school. I presented this information at the conference in addition to what was written.

Strategies For Organizing And Implementing-

1. Assessment
2. Goal Setting
3. Stimulating Involvement

Activity #5 - Simulate or an initial parent meeting
Activity #6 - Create goals for the academic term
Activity #7 - Brainstorm ways to motivate parents.

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